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Increasing Outbreaks of Brucellosis in Animals and in Humans

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Report Highlights:

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) reported 970 human cases of brucellosis and euthanized approximately 32,000 animals (mostly sheep) since January 2008. In the last several years, outbreaks of disease in animals and in humans have caused growing concerns. The "test and slaughter" policy that has been applied by the veterinary authorities for brucellosis control appears to be unsatisfactory. Veterinarians propose to use the World Bank expertise to create more efficient strategy for the disease control. Brucellosis control is hampered by BiH complex veterinary service and poor cooperation between veterinary health and human health sectors, among other weaknesses.

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Outbreaks of Brucellosis in Animals and in Humans

In the last several years, outbreaks of brucellosis in small ruminants and in humans in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) have caused growing concerns and resulted in significant economic loss. BiH epidemiologists are more concerned every day by the number of human cases of brucellosis. There are 757 reported human cases in the Federation of BiH (FBiH).¹ since the beginning of 2008, compared to last year's 488 cases in the same period. In the Republika Srpska (RS) there were 213 human cases since January 2008. Epidemiologists believe that the total number of 970 human cases must be higher because some cases are asymptomatic and therefore possibly unreported. They expect that the brucellosis situation gets worse in the coming months because of spring reproduction in sheep.

The number of euthanized animals has increased severely from the last year, from 8,788 in 2007 to the approximately 32,000 animals in 2008 (mostly sheep). In 2008, the RS tested 205,000 small ruminants, found 6,120 positive and euthanized 18,360 animals. The FBiH tested 315,000 small ruminants and found 13,500 positive. The sheep and goat population is approximately 1.1 million heads.

BiH Entities have separate strategies for brucellosis control and funds used for that purpose, and there is no national-level strategy. For example, all animals from herd are euthanized if more than 20% of animals from herd test positive in the RS, or more than 50% in the FBiH. The Entities' also apply different indemnity policies.

The State Veterinary Office (SVO) is tasked to harmonize the Entities' strategies and ensure regular reporting on the outbreaks. Apparently, the situation is getting worse every day, so the SVO created an expert team in order to create a common strategy for brucellosis control for the whole country. Veterinarians suggest using the World Bank expertise to recommend the most appropriate strategy given the situation in BiH. In the meantime, current "test and slaughter" policy will apply.

There have been several problems that make easy for brucellosis to spread from animal to animal and from animal to human. The nomadic grazing system makes animal identification and localization very difficult. The Government oversight for farm registration, animal identification, and animal movement control is still very weak. BiH has a complex administrative setup that makes collaboration among different sectors and administrative units very difficult. Reportedly, the regulations are often not enforced and particularly for animal movement controls. The reasons include shortage of personnel, shortage of equipment, insufficient animal health control funds, lack of communication between the veterinary subunits, and lack of compliance by the producers.

According to existing Entities' regulations, if farmers become aware of sick animals they should inform the veterinary inspector immediately and following that, testing is being conducted. If brucellosis is detected, farmers should wait until the veterinary authorities arrange service to euthanize sick animals and dispose them (animals are buried in the ground). This procedure is usually slow and farmers wait for several weeks to get rid of sick animals. During that time animals must be fed and watered, which poses risk to farmers and their families and creates further economic loss. The indemnity system mechanisms are

¹Under the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement, Bosnia Herzegovina (BiH) is divided into two Entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (F BiH) and Republika Srpska (RS). There is also the District of Brcko, established by a separate international agreement in 2000, which has a special administrative status.

usually slow and once sick animals are disposed, farmers wait for several weeks to receive compensation. Regarding euthanized animals disposal, burying sites are often opposed by residents that live near by. There are cases when wild animals dig for carcasses and further spread infected tissues, because euthanized animals were improperly buried. It has been reported in the media that sick animals are traded in illegal livestock markets, slaughtered and entered the food chain.

BiH Veterinary and Human Health Sectors

There are three veterinary services, the Entities' and the Brcko District (BD), and they function as three independent parallel organizations within the same country, each operating in their respective territories. Although the State Veterinary Office (SVO) was established seven years ago, in order to impose coordination between the veterinary services and to strengthen international relations, there is no animal health program/strategy yet in place. The veterinary sector is seriously hampered by this complex administrative structure.

Both Entities have adopted rules for the control of brucellosis and they operate separate funds for disease control, but it appears that these are not well coordinated. Although there is no physical border between the entities, an administrative 'border' between BiH authorities exists with regard to animal disease control and surveillance, and general policies in the veterinary sector. This not only affects the public health and food safety in the country, but also prevents exports of foods of animal origin and is in itself a barrier to trade with other countries in the region.

The situation is further complicated by a complex human health sector structure. BiH has thirteen ministries of health for a population of less than 4 million – one for each entity, one for the BD and one for each of the ten cantonal ministries in FBiH. These ministries of health have institutes of public health which are responsible for communicable disease health monitoring, prevention, and control activities within their epidemiology departments. The RS system is centralized, with planning, regulation and management functions being the responsibility of the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare. The recently established state-level Health Sector within the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) has a few employees and a narrow mandate that does not include communicable disease control and prevention. Generally, there are poor coordination arrangements between the state and the entity-level public and animal health institutions.

International Assistance

A team of U.S epidemiologists from Center for Disease and Control (CDC) and USDA visited BiH in 2000 and 2007 to assess the situation regarding brucellosis (among other diseases), assist with laboratory detection and monitoring, and provide recommendations for its control and eradication. The team has made the following recommendations for the executive level: 1) Establish an Inter-Sectorial State Commission for Zoonotic and Emerging Infections, Establish a State Office for Communicable Disease Control and Prevention, 3) Establish a State Public Health Laboratory Reference Network, 4) Develop a State Animal Health Strategy, and 5) Create a State Science Based Animal Health Program. So far, there has been no progress in these areas.

The World Bank (WB) has started Avian Influenza (AI) Preparedness Project worth \$7 million, aimed to minimize the threat posed both to humans and domestic animals and poultry by the Avian Influenza or any other zoonoses, such as brucellosis and to prepare for, respond to and control this or other pandemics. Among other activities, the project will support strengthening of health and veterinary services, disease surveillance, diagnostic capacity and applied research, as well as enhancing public health program planning and coordination.

The European Union (EU) assistance to the veterinary sector has been available for some time, but has resulted in little progress.